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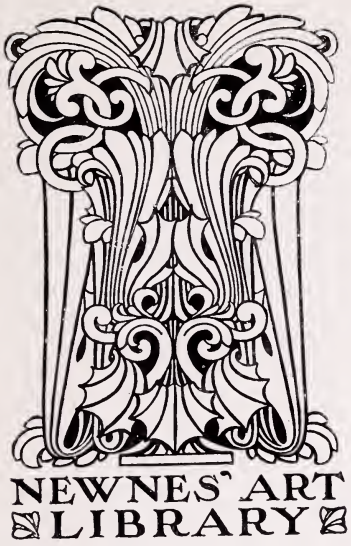

CONSTABLE'S SKETCHES

SKETCH FOR "THE VALLEY FARM"

REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF JAMES DEROCK, ESQ., R.A., FROM THE PICTURE IN HIS POSSESSION

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CONSTABLE'S SKETCHES

IN OIL & WATER COLOVRS

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JOHN CONSTABLE

BY SIR JAMES D. LINTON, R.I.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JOHN CONSTABLE was born on June 11th, 1776, at East Bergholt, in Suffolk, a district that remained the chief inspiration of his work throughout the whole of his life. He was a weak child, and his career at school was far from brilliant. His father, a miller with a large trade, desired that his son should enter one of the professions, the Church for preference. But the lad had made up his mind to become a painter, an occupation his father at first refused to allow him to follow. As time passed on it became obvious that Constable had no vocation for the Church, and he entered the family business. Here he remained until about the year 1795, seeking every opportunity to practise the art of painting. He had for company a friendly enthusiast, John Dunthorne, the village plumber and glazier. In the daytime they sketched from nature; at night they copied engravings after Raphael and Claude, or watercolours by Girtin. Constable received much encouragement from Sir George Beaumont, a capable amateur landscape painter who had a great veneration for the old masters, and was in the habit of carrying a favourite canvas by Claude (No. 61 in the National Gallery, London) wherever he travelled. Struck by Constable's promise, the baronet interested himself in the boy's desire to become an artist. At length the elder Constable consented that his son should settle in London and become definitely a student. In 1799 John Constable entered the schools of the Royal Academy, and, receiving an allowance

from his father and the proceeds of an occasional sale, he seems to have lived without any great hardship. But, whilst working in the metropolis, he was constantly looking forward to forthcoming visits to Suffolk. He was never a Londoner in spirit. Years after (in 1821) he wrote:—"The Londoners, with all their ingenuity as artists, know nothing of the feelings of a country life, the essence of landscape." In 1799 he wrote to his old friend John Dunthorne:—"This fine weather almost makes me melancholy; it recalls so forcibly every scene we have visited and drawn together. I even love every stile and stump, and every lane in the village, so deep rooted are early impressions."

Like many lovers of nature, Constable was somewhat of a recluse, and disliked society. He possessed several good friends, however. Sir George Beaumont has already been mentioned. Many years after, Constable visited Beaumont at Cole-Orton, and his letters contain several interesting references to his doings. From them Leslie in his "Life" compiles the following stories. 'Though Sir George Beaumont and Constable agreed, generally, in their opinions of the old masters, yet their tastes differed materially on some points of art, and their discourse never languished for want of "an animated no." A constant communion with pictures, the tints of which are subdued by time, no doubt tends to unfit the eye for the enjoyment of freshness; and Sir George thought Constable too daring in the modes he adopted to obtain this quality; while Constable saw that Sir George often allowed himself to be deceived by the effects of time, of accident, and by the tricks that are, far oftener than is generally supposed, played by dealers, to give mellowness to pictures; and, in these matters, each was disposed to set the other right. Sir George had placed a small landscape by Gaspar Poussin on his easel, close to a picture he was painting, and said, "Now, if I can match these tints I am sure to be right." "But suppose, Sir George," replied Constable, "Gaspar could rise from his grave, do you think he would know his own picture in its present state? or if he did, should we not find it difficult to persuade him that somebody had not smeared tar or cart grease over its surface, and then wiped it imperfectly off?" At another time, Sir George recommended the colour of an old Cremona fiddle for the prevailing colour of everything, and this Constable answered by laying an old fiddle on the green lawn before the house. Again, Sir George, who seemed to consider the autumnal tints necessary, at least to some part of a

landscape, said, "Do you not find it very difficult to determine where to place your *brown tree?*" And the reply was, "Not in the least, for I never put such a thing into a picture."'

Before 1811 Constable had been fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of the Rev. John Fisher (after Archdeacon, and chaplain to the Bishop of Salisbury), which ultimately ripened into a fast and lasting friendship. The painter owed much to the warm encouragement and help which Archdeacon Fisher never failed to give. Another event had a marked influence upon Constable's future. He fell in love with Maria Bicknell, daughter of the solicitor to the Admiralty, and grand-daughter of the rector of Bergholt. The courtship was a long one, for Dr. Rudde, the rector, resolutely set his face against the engagement. The marriage did not take place until October, 1816.

Constable exhibited at the Royal Academy for the first time in 1802, and in 1819 was elected an Associate. Although his position as an artist was then assured, his pictures fetched comparatively small prices, and his art lacked the appreciation it deserved. The year 1824 was the most eventful of his life. Three of his pictures were exhibited in Paris, where they made a remarkable sensation amongst the French artists. From Charles X. Constable received a gold medal as a reward and acknowledgment of the great artistic merit of his works. When exhibited at the town of Lille they received a second medal. These honours increased the fame of Constable, but they do not seem to have had much effect upon his financial prosperity. The most celebrated of the canvases is the *Hay-Wain,* now in the National Gallery, having been bequeathed to that institution by the late Mr. Vaughan.

In 1829 Constable was elected a full member of the Royal Academy, and this marked the culmination of his career. Before his election Constable moved his family from London to Hampstead. The heath of this village so charmed him that, next to the county in which he was born, Hampstead Heath from that time supplied him with most of his subjects. Hampstead, Bergholt, and Salisbury were the main sources of his inspiration. Early in his career he made a sketching tour through Cumberland, but the north country was not sympathetic (he told Leslie that the solitude of the mountains oppressed his spirits), and he never produced any important pictures based upon the results of his studies in that region. In 1830 Constable commenced to publish a set of mezzotint engravings from his

paintings and studies, admirably reproduced in that process by David Lucas. Towards the end of his life he delivered a series of lectures upon Landscape Art, containing the results of his experience, observation, and practice. From these lectures students can gather many truths and much knowledge.

Constable died very suddenly on April 1st, 1837, and was buried in the churchyard of Hampstead. His life was not a long one, but it was uniformly peaceful. He had many disappointments, and one great sorrow. At the same time he had compensations which do not fall to the lot of all men. He loved his family; he was loved by his friends. Above all he was supremely happy in the practice of his art. "It is a great happiness," says Bacon, "when men's professions and their inclinations accord." Constable had discovered this truth himself, for the quotation is the closing sentence in the last lecture he delivered upon the art he adorned so brilliantly.

CONSTABLE'S ART

OWING to various causes few painters of the English school have been so misappreciated as Constable. Until a few years ago (when South Kensington Museum acquired the collection of drawings, sketches, and studies) the productions of his middle and late periods alone had been seen by the public. His early pictures, worked with the utmost care even to the verge of hardness, were hardly known and are now rarely seen. Hence, although Constable was admitted to be one of our foremost landscape painters, he was not accepted as a draughtsman, and his robust technique was considered almost coarse. These opinions were still more accentuated by the criticism of Ruskin, to whom the art of Constable was to a large extent unsympathetic. The broad and massive treatment which Constable employed was utterly opposed to the methods and processes advocated by Ruskin in his writings concerning the technical education of the painter. Ruskin's keen and subtle appreciation of Turner seems to have prevented him from entering into the spirit of Constable's work.

Constable's aims are tersely put in the biography by Leslie. He painted light, dews, breezes, bloom, and freshness. In his oil sketches and studies we see how earnestly he worked to attain these qualities, the very life and soul of landscape art. In his pictures we note how paramount in importance he deemed it to retain and realise them. "*There is room enough for a natural painter*," he wrote in 1802. "The great vice of the present day is *bravura*, an attempt to do something beyond the truth. Fashion always had, and will have, its day; but truth in all things will last, and can only have just claims on posterity." His point of view never altered. Constable, like all men with original ideas, was in advance of his time. In his day Landscape Art was considered by most people to be inferior to figure painting. This is well illustrated by the story told of Sir Thomas Lawrence, who was President of the Royal Academy at the time of Constable's election. It was, and still is, the custom for

those newly elected into the fold of the Academy to call upon the members and thank them individually for the honour conferred. When Constable called upon Sir Thomas he was met by the chilling remark that "he might consider himself fortunate, as there were historical painters waiting for election."

Landscape art was ignored. Out of all the distinguished landscape painters of this country only three of the first rank have been elected members of the Royal Academy, viz., Wilson, Turner, and Constable. After Constable not one of the landscape painters now recognised as masters has been received into that body. If we take the period in which Lee, Witherington, and Creswick were members, we find amongst the "outsiders" Bonington, Müller, Cotman, De Wint, David Cox, George Barret, jun., and John Linnell. These men are admittedly masters of their art, not only in water colour painting, but also in oils. This neglect can never be repaired, although it is somewhat condoned by the honourable positions given to the works of these painters in the loan exhibitions held at Burlington House every winter.

Constable was a liberal man in his artistic tastes, and ever ready to acknowledge influences valuable to him in the practice of his art. In his letters he makes constant references to his predecessors to whom he was indebted, and writes of them with admiration and gratitude. He speaks often of his studies from Claude, Ruysdael, and others, and especially does he express his admiration for Richard Wilson, an artist who is even now far from being fully recognised. In a letter dated 1823, Constable thus writes: "I went to the gallery of Sir John Leicester to see the English artists. I recollect nothing so much as a large solemn, bright, warm, fresh landscape by Wilson, which still swims in my brain like a delicious dream. Poor Wilson. Think of his fate, think of his magnificence. But the mind loses its dignity less in adversity than in prosperity. He is now walking arm in arm with Milton and Linnæus. He was one of those appointed to show the world the hidden stores and beauties of nature." What a tribute to Wilson's art! One can hardly imagine that the man to whom such words could apply, words coming from a master of his craft, lived a life of comparative penury. Wilson would probably have starved if the Royal Academy had not conferred upon him a small post in their institution. Constable's own experience must have told him how hard was the life, and how bitter was the disappointment of Wilson.

We know that Constable was not commercially successful as an artist. His works were never popular, because his aims were never understood. His robust vigour was repellent to the average man. Especially were his productions disliked when he endeavoured to represent the glistening and broken lights on meadow and foliage by the process called "spotting." This method might have looked over emphasized when the picture was freshly painted. But now, when time has softened the surface, it takes a right place, and prevents the canvas looking "sleepy," an effect Constable had a great horror of.

This process was instinctively adopted by many of the best water colour painters, particularly by David Cox. No doubt the method came from the working of the material when making quick sketches from nature. In laying on rapid washes of water colour for sky, foreground, foliage, and distance, numerous spaces of the white ground are left. These spaces, many of which are hardly visible, give an extreme sparkle and brilliancy. They represent the glitter of reflected light from the sky across foliage and foreground. When the sketch was finished these lights were modified up to a certain point, but Constable was very guarded as to how far this was done. If carried too far the drawing became lifeless. By forgetting this fact the inferior artist, in trying to get finish, lost the greater qualities of spontaneity and truth of effect.

It was not only in the obvious that Constable excelled. He was a great and noble colourist. He was subtle in the arrangement of his composition, and, though painting much deep shade, tenacious of his effects of lights. Most important of all, he never failed to reproduce those exquisite flickering lights caused by the day sky which fall upon all objects in the open air.

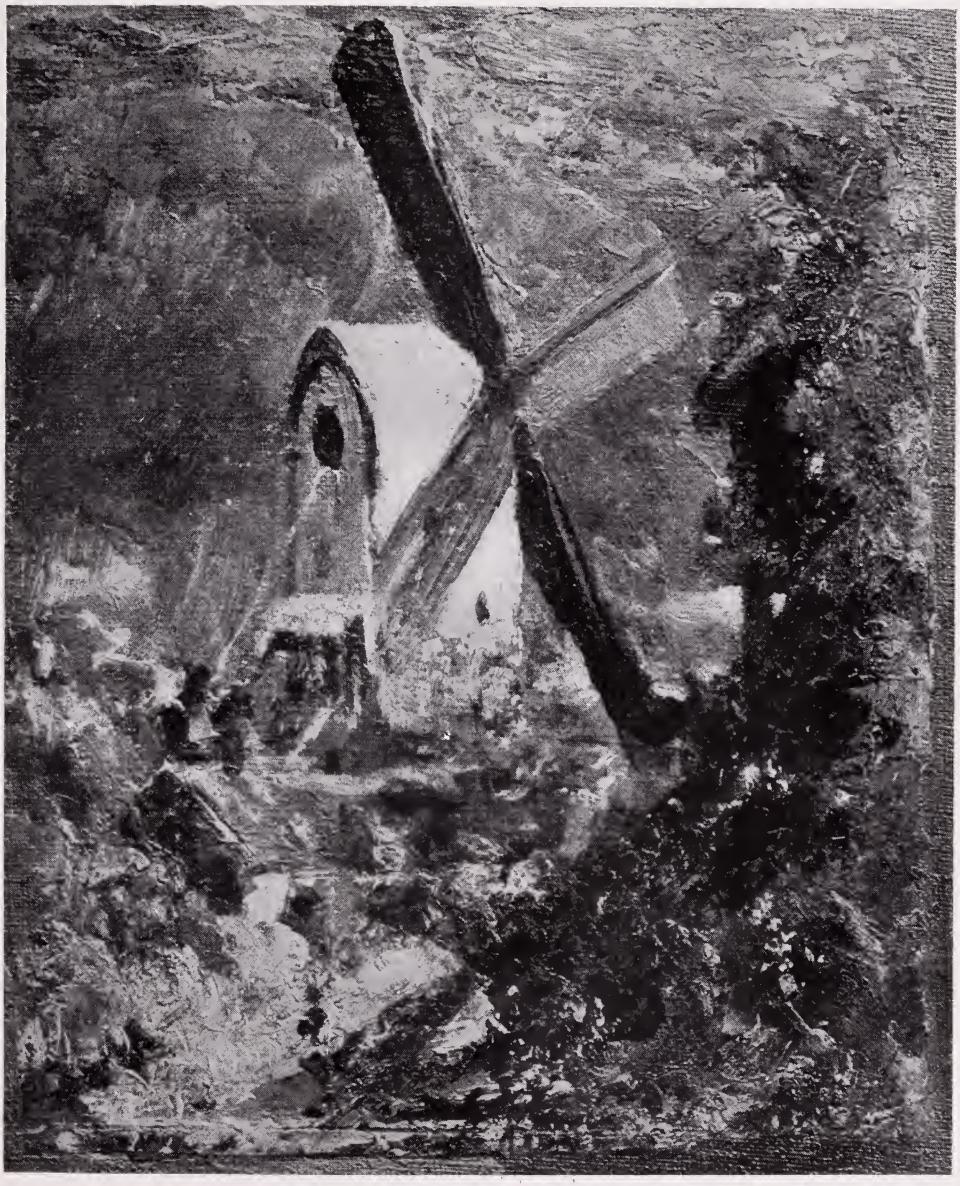
John Constable has been often and truly called the Father of Modern Impressionism. His first desire was to reproduce God's light in his work, and to give a true and full impression of nature both in colour and chiaroscuro. The success with which he attained these objects amply justifies the claim he has to the distinction. His art, as a consequence, has had the widest and most lasting influence both at home and abroad. In mentioning his name in this connection I do not forget that all great landscape painters have been, by the very nature of their subject, impressionists. Turner was especially an impressionist, but, although Turner is accepted as the greatest master of landscape painting, and his work has not been without very great influence, Constable's robust and massive manner has effected the modern schools more universally.

CONSTABLE

In a letter already quoted Constable summed up the qualities at which he chiefly aimed in his pictures—"light, dews, breezes, bloom, and freshness; not one of which has yet been perfected on the canvas of any painter in the world." In another letter he refers to his desire to see the sun shine, the fields bloom, the trees blossom, and to hear the foliage rustle. In a letter written to Archdeacon Fisher he remarks: "'Oh dear, oh dear, I shall never let my longing eyes see that famous country (Italy).' These are the words of old Richardson, and like him I am doomed never to see the living scenes that inspired the landscape of Wilson and Claude. No, but I was born to paint a happier land, my own dear old England; and when I cease to love her, may I, as Wordworth says,

> 'Never more hear
> Her green leaves rustle, nor her torrents roar!'"

He never ceased to love his homeland. And his intense affection and sympathy for the English country side enabled him to paint it in a glorious ecstasy, the results of which are not likely to be ever surpassed.



A MILL NEAR BRIGHTON

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

A SLUICE ON THE STOUR

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

VIEW IN THE CLOSE,
SALISBURY

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

A RUSTIC BUILDING

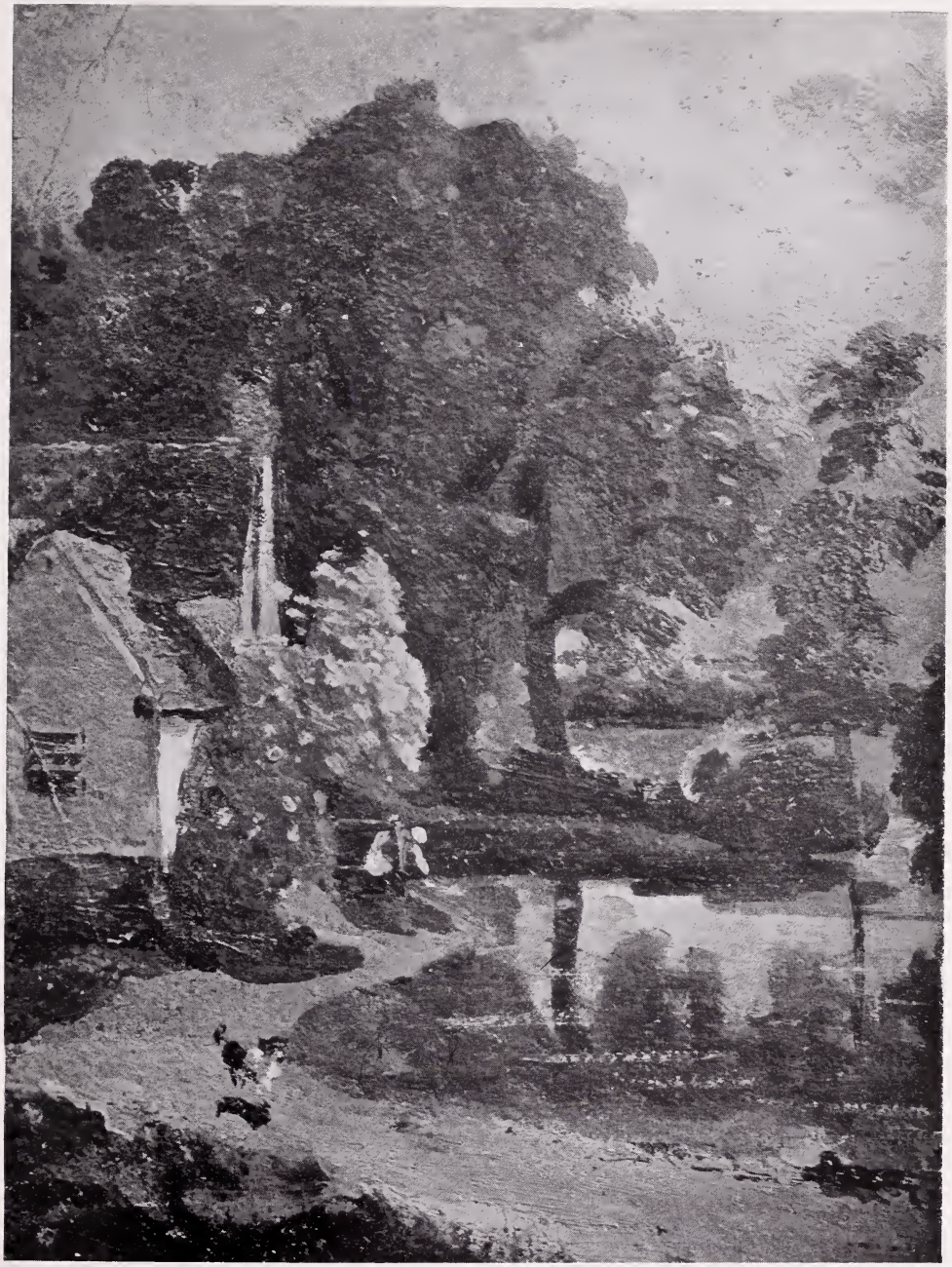
FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

LANDSCAPE WITH WATER

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

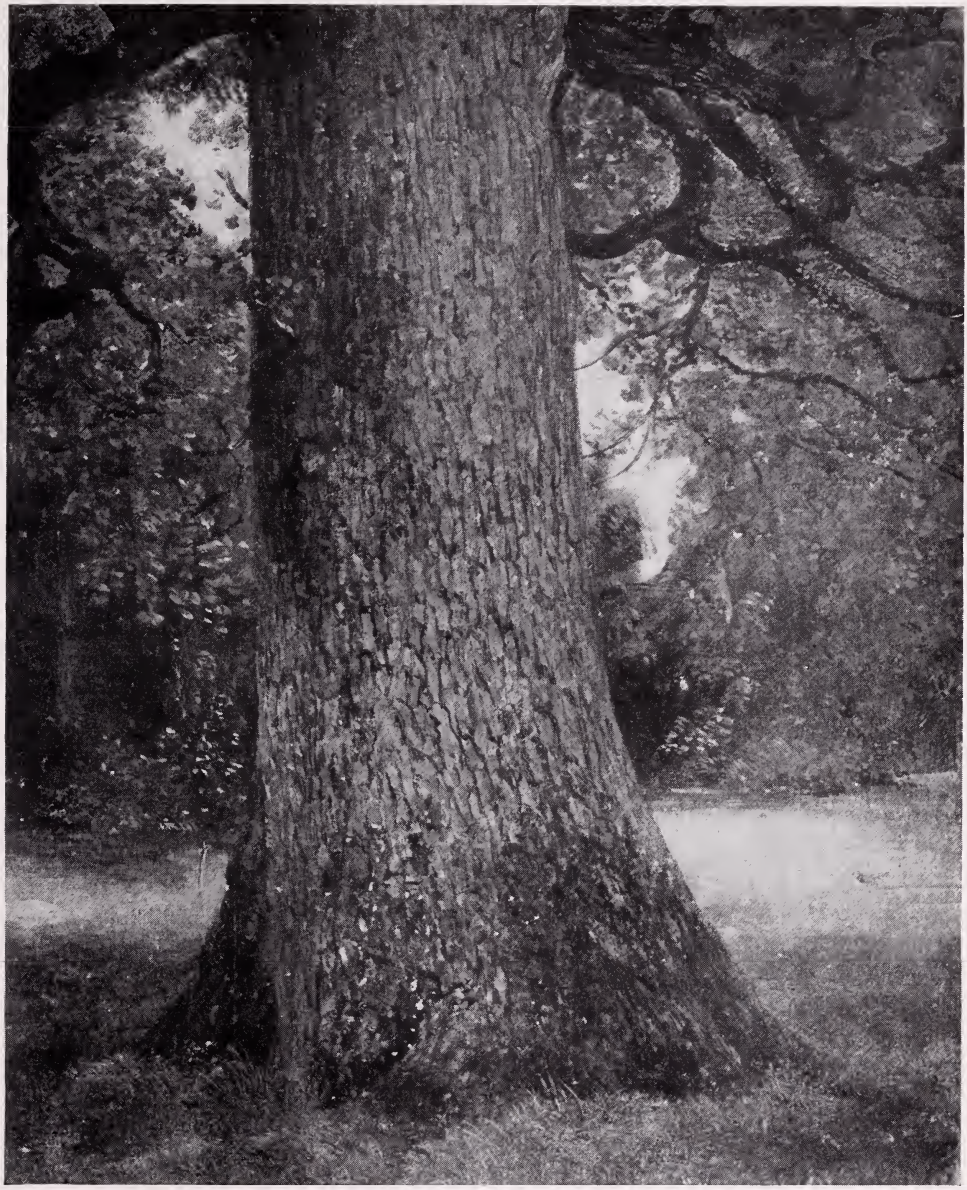
A VALLEY SCENE WITH TREES

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM



WILLY LOTT'S HOUSE, NEAR FLATFORD MILL

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM



STUDY OF THE STEM
OF AN ELM TREE

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

A STUDY OF TREES AND SKY

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

VIEW AT STOKE-BY-NAYLAND

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

STUDY OF TREE STEMS

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

HAY-FIELD IN SUFFOLK—SUNSET

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

BRIGHTON BEACH WITH COLLIERS

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
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VIEW AT EAST BERGHOLT, SUFFOLK

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

"THE GROVE," HAMPSTEAD

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

HEATH SCENE, HAMPSTEAD

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

BRIGHTON BEACH

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
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SKETCH IN A WOOD

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
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VIEW AT HAMPSTEAD HEATH

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
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ON THE STOUR, NEAR DEDHAM

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

THE HAY-WAIN

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

COAST SCENE WITH SHIPPING

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
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WEYMOUTH BAY

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

A STUDY OF TREES : EVENING

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
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A VILLAGE FAIR

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
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SPRING

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

PORCH OF EAST BERGHOLT CHURCH

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

A MILL NEAR BRIGHTON

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

STUDY OF SKY AND TREES

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

HAMPSTEAD HEATH

REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF JAMES DEBROCK, ESQ., R.I.
FROM THE PICTURE IN HIS POSSESSION

STUDY FOR "THE LEAPING HORSE"

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

DEDHAM MILL AND CHURCH, ESSEX

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

VIEW AT DEDHAM, SUFFOLK

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

LANDSCAPE STUDY

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

VIEW IN DEDHAM VALE, SUFFOLK

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

DEDHAM VALE, SUFFOLK

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

COAST SCENE WITH FISHING BOATS

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

ON THE SKIRTS OF A WOOD

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

LANDSCAPE AND CART

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
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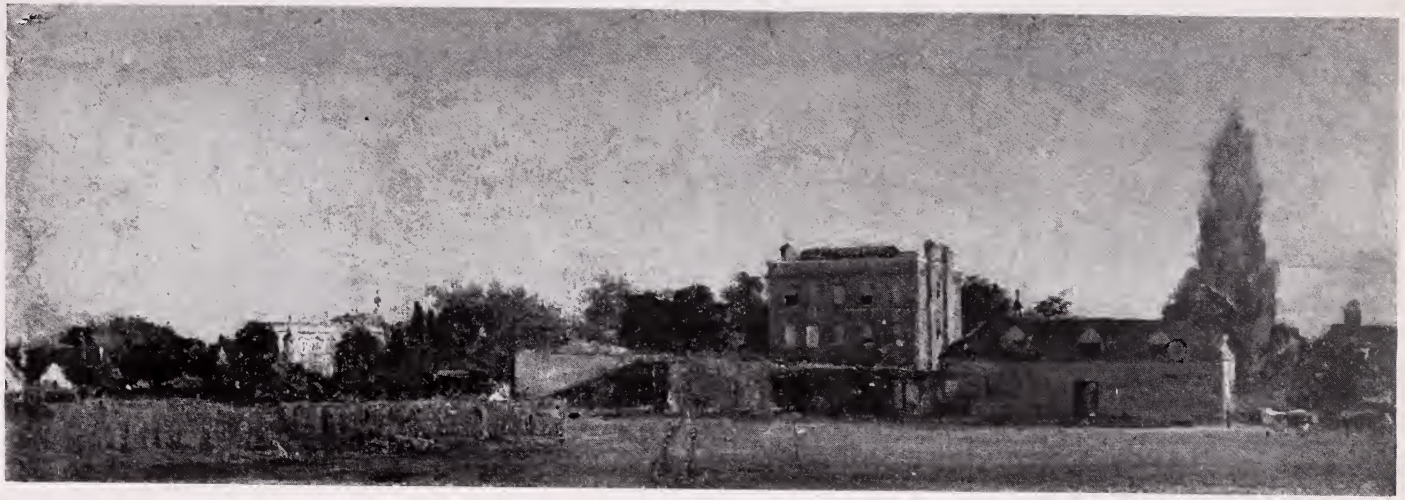
VIEW AT HAMPSTEAD HEATH

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM



THE HOUSE OF GOLDING CONSTABLE, ESQ.,
AT EAST BERGHOLT

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

VIEW ON THE STOUR

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

AUTUMNAL SUNSET

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

OLD SARUM, WILTS

FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

A SKETCH FOR "THE VALLEY FARM"

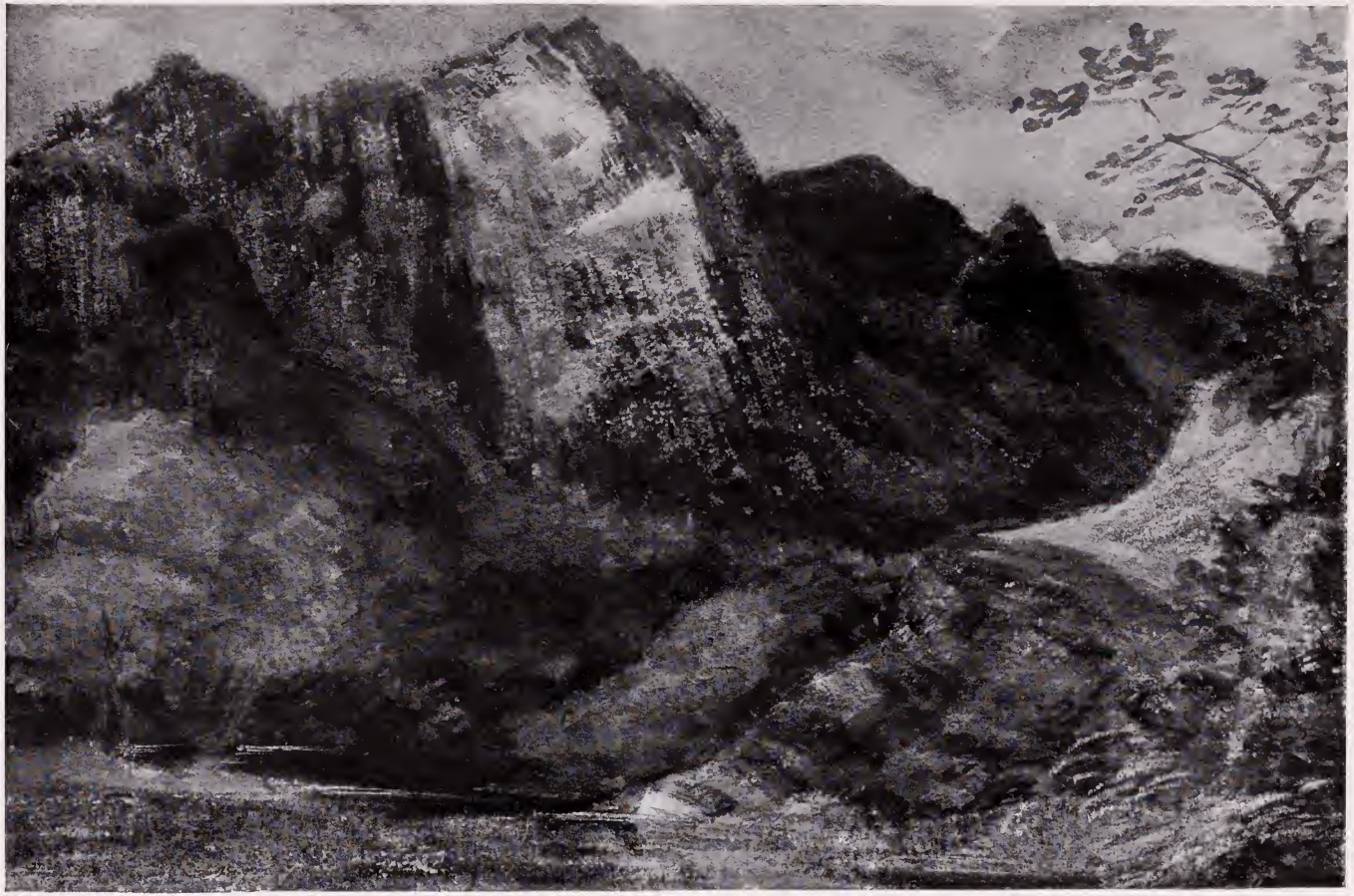
FROM THE OIL SKETCH IN
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

A SHED, COTTAGES, AND A WINDMILL

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

VIEW AT BORROWDALE, CUMBERLAND

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM



VIEW AT BORROWDALE, CUMBERLAND

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

STOKE POGES CHURCH, BUCKS

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

FITTLEWORTH MILL, SUSSEX

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

MOUNTAIN SCENE IN CUMBERLAND

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

VIEW AT BORROWDALE, CUMBERLAND

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

STONEHENGE, WILTS

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

OLD HOUSES AT HARNHAM BRIDGE,
SALISBURY

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

RUINS OF COWDRAY

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

TILLINGTON CHURCH

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

COTTAGE NEAR READING

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IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

COTTAGE IN SUFFOLK

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

POND AND COTTAGES; A STORM APPROACHING

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

A VILLAGE ON A RIVER

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

AT HAMPSTEAD

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A SEAPORT WITH A STORM PASSING

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR SKETCH
IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

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